

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
RACE TO THE TOP ASSESSMENT PROGRAM
NOTICE OF PUBLIC MEETINGS AND REQUEST FOR INPUT
October 20, 2009

SUMMARY

By March 2010, the Secretary of Education (Secretary) intends to announce a competition for a program that would support one or more consortia of States that are working toward jointly developing and implementing common, high-quality assessments aligned with a consortium's common set of K-12 standards that are internationally benchmarked and that build toward college and career readiness by the time of high school completion. To inform the design of this program and the development of a notice inviting applications that establishes the requirements for this competition and to provide technical assistance to States, the Secretary is seeking input from States, technical experts, and members of the public through public meetings and written submissions. Following the public meetings and review the written submissions, the Department intends to publish a notice inviting applications for such a competition.

PUBLIC MEETINGS

Meeting Structure

Public meetings will have two parts:

- Input from invited panels of experts and stakeholders
 - Invited panelists will have a set amount of time to individually respond to the questions in the notice
 - Department representatives will ask questions of individual panelists and facilitate cross-panelist discussion
- Open opportunity to share input
 - Each meeting will have 60 to 90 minutes dedicated to opportunities for interested members of the public, who have registered to speak, to respond to the questions in the notice
 - Each individual scheduled to speak will have 5 minutes to provide oral input
 - Written submission will also be accepted

Meeting Locations, Dates, and Topics

- Boston – Nov 12-13:
 - General Assessment (1 day)
 - High School Assessments (1/2 day)
 - Technology and Innovation in Assessment (1/2 day)
- Atlanta – Nov 17-18:
 - General Assessment (1 day)
 - Assessing Students with Disabilities (1/2 day)
- Denver – Dec 1-2:
 - General Assessment (1 day)
 - Assessing English Language Learners (1/2 day)

Assessment Program Design and Questions

The Assessment Program is intended to support consortia of States working toward jointly developing and implementing a next generation of common summative assessments that are aligned with a common set of K-12 internationally benchmarked, college and career ready standards that model and support effective teaching and student learning. Such summative assessments would allow students, including students with disabilities and English language learners, to demonstrate at each grade level tested their mastery of knowledge and skills and the extent to which each student is on track to college and career readiness by the time of high school graduation.

In designing the requirements for this program, the Secretary is particularly interested in innovative and effective approaches to assessment that will assist States in creating powerful and useful systems of assessment that meet these requirements.

In the following paragraphs, we have provided a framework that outlines the characteristics we believe should be required or encouraged in assessment systems supported by a grant under this proposed program. We then list the specific questions on which we seek input, taking into account this framework. It is important to note that this proposed program, the public meetings, and the framework below would focus on the design and quality of assessment systems and not accountability policies. Given the pending reauthorization of the ESEA, we intend that the Assessment Program would support the development of the best possible assessments that could be not only appropriately used by States under the current ESEA assessment and accountability requirements, but could also serve additional purposes as outlined in the notice.

FRAMEWORK

Design of Assessment Systems – General Requirements

The Department is particularly interested in supporting the development of summative assessments that measure:

- Individual student achievement as measured against standards that build toward college and career readiness by the time of high school completion;
- Individual student growth (that is, the change in student achievement data for an individual student between two or more points in time); and
- The extent to which each individual student is on track, at each grade level tested, toward college or career readiness by the time of high school completion.

At a minimum, we would expect that the common assessments would measure each of these elements in the subject areas of reading/language arts and mathematics, and would provide information for each student annually in grades 3 through 8, and provide information at the high school level about each student's college and/or career readiness. The assessments need not be limited to a single end-of-year assessment but could include multiple summative components administered at different points during the school year. Moreover, the assessments might be viewed as replacing rather than adding to the assessments currently in use in States participating in the consortia.

Information gathered from the assessments should be useable in informing:

- Teaching, learning, and program improvement;
- Determinations of school effectiveness;
- Determinations of principal and teacher effectiveness to inform evaluation and the provision of support to teachers and principals; and
- Determinations of individual student college and career readiness, such as determinations made for high school exit decisions, college course placement in credit-bearing classes, or college entrance.

Design of Assessment Systems – Required Characteristics

With respect to the design of the assessment system, the Department would likely require that the assessments, at a minimum, meet the following characteristics:

- 1) Reflect and support good instructional practice by eliciting complex responses and demonstrations of knowledge and skills consistent with the goal of being college and career ready by the time of high school completion;
- 2) Be accessible to the broadest possible range of students, with appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities and English language learners;
- 3) Contain varied and unpredictable item types and content sampling, so as not to create incentives for inappropriate test preparation and curriculum narrowing;
- 4) Produce results that can be aggregated at the classroom, school, LEA, and State levels;

- 5) Produce reports that are relevant, actionable, timely, accurate, and displayed in ways that are clear and understandable for target audiences, including teachers, students and their families, schools, LEAs, communities, States, institutions of higher education, policymakers, researchers, and others;
- 6) Make effective and appropriate use of technology;
- 7) Be valid, reliable, and fair;
- 8) Be appropriately secure for the intended purposes;
- 9) Have the fastest possible turnaround time on scoring, without forcing the use of lower-quality assessment items; and
- 10) Be able to be maintained, administered, and scored at a cost that is sustainable over time.

Design of Assessment Systems – Desired Characteristics

In addition, the Department is particularly interested in assessment systems in which:

- 1) Teachers are involved in scoring of constructed responses and performance tasks in order to measure effectively students' mastery of higher-order content and skills and to build teacher expertise and understanding of performance expectations;
- 2) The assessment approach can be easily adapted to include summative assessments in other content areas (e.g., science, social studies) in the future;
- 3) The technology "platform" created for summative assessments supports assessment and item development, administration, scoring, and reporting that increases the quality and cost-effectiveness of assessments; and
- 4) The technology infrastructure created for summative assessments can be easily adapted to support practitioners and professionals in the development, administration, and/or scoring of high-quality interim assessments.

Design of Assessment Systems – LEA-Level Activities

With funds that are directed to LEAs under this program, the Department is interested in supporting LEA-level activities that are designed by the State consortium to support development and implementation of its assessment system. With respect to LEA-level funds, the Department would likely require that the funds be used to support the following types of activities conducted by LEAs that choose to participate:

- Pilot testing of the new assessments with different populations, including English language learners and students with disabilities;
- Designing systems to support and enable effective and consistent teacher scoring, providing professional development support for these activities, and implementing them statewide;
- Statewide transition to the consortium's K-12 common, college and career ready, internationally benchmarked standards, with new high-quality assessments (consistent with the State plans described in the notice of proposed priorities, requirements, definitions, and selection criteria for the Race to the Top Fund general program);
- Development of formative or interim assessments that align with State summative assessments as part of a comprehensive assessment system.

QUESTIONS FOR INPUT

The specific questions on which the Department seeks input are listed below.

General Assessment Questions

- 1) Propose an assessment system (that is, a series of one or more assessments) that you would recommend and that meets the general requirements and required characteristics described in the notice. Describe how this assessment system would address the tensions or tradeoffs in meeting all of the general requirements and required characteristics. Describe the strengths and limitations of your recommended system, including the extent to which it is able to validly meet each of the requirements described in the notice. Where possible, provide specific illustrative examples.

- 2) For each assessment proposed in response to question 1), describe the--
 - Optimal design, including--
 - Type (e.g., norm-referenced, criterion-referenced, adaptive, other);
 - Frequency, length, and timing of assessment administrations (including a consideration of the value of student, teacher, and administrative time);
 - Format, item-type specifications (including the pros and cons of using different types of items for different purposes), and mode of administration;
 - Whether and how the above answers might differ for different grade levels and content areas;
 - Administration, scoring, and interpretation of any open-ended item types, including methods for ensuring consistency in teacher scoring;
 - Approach to releasing assessment items during each assessment cycle in order to ensure public access to the assessment questions; and
 - Technology and other resources needed to develop, administer, and score the assessments, and/or report results.
- 3) ARRA requires that States award at least 50 percent of their Race to the Top funds to LEAs. The section of the notice entitled Design of Assessment Systems – LEA-Level Activities, describes how LEAs might be required to use these funds. What activities at the LEA level would best advance the transition to and implementation of the consortium’s common, college and career ready standards and assessments?
- 4) If a goal is that teachers are involved in the scoring of constructed responses and performance tasks in order to measure effectively students’ mastery of higher-order content and skills and to build teacher expertise and understanding of performance expectations, how can such assessments be administered and scored in the most time-efficient and cost-effective ways?
- 5) Given the assessment design you proposed in response to question 1), what is your recommended approach to competency-based student testing versus grade-level-based student testing? Why? How would your design ensure high expectations for all students?
- 6) Given the assessment design you proposed in response to question 1), how would you recommend that the assessments be designed, timed, and scored to provide the most useful information on teacher and principal effectiveness?

Specific Technical Assessment Questions

- 1) What is the best technical approach for ensuring the vertical alignment of the entire assessment system across grades (e.g., grades 3 through 8 and high school)?
- 2) What would be the best technical approach for ensuring external validity of such an assessment system, particularly as it relates to postsecondary readiness and high-quality internationally benchmarked content standards?
- 3) What is the proportion of assessment questions that you recommend releasing each testing cycle in order to ensure public access to the assessment while minimizing linking risk? What are the implications of this proportion for the costs of developing new assessment questions and for the costs and design of linking studies across time?

High School Assessment Questions

Provide recommendations on the optimal approach to measuring each student’s college and career readiness by the time of high school completion. In particular, consider:

- 1) How would you demonstrate that high school students are on track to college and career readiness, and at what points throughout high school would you recommend measuring this? Discuss your recommendations on the use of end-of-course assessments versus comprehensive assessments of college and career readiness. (Note: If you recommend end-of-course assessments, please share your input on how to reconcile the fact that college and career ready standards might not include all of the topics typically covered in today’s high school courses.)

Questions on the Assessment of English Language Learners

- 1) Provide recommendations for the development and administration of assessments for each content area that are valid and reliable for English language learners. How would you recommend that the assessments take into account the variations in English language proficiency of students in a manner that enables them to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in core academic areas? Innovative assessment designs and uses of technology have the potential to be inclusive of more students. How would you propose we take this into account?
- 2) In the context of reflecting student achievement, what are the relative merits of developing and administering content assessments in native languages? What are the technical, logistical, and financial requirements?

Question on the Assessment of Students with Disabilities

- 1) Taking into account the diversity of students with disabilities who take the assessments, provide recommendations for the development and administration of assessments for each content area that are valid and reliable, and that enable students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in core academic areas. Innovative assessment designs and uses of technology have the potential to be inclusive of more students. How would you propose we take this into account?

Questions on Technology and Innovation in Assessment

- 1) Propose how you would recommend that different innovative technologies be deployed to create better assessments, and why. Please include illustrative examples in areas such as novel item types, constructed response scoring solutions, uses of mobile computing devices, and so on.
- 2) We envision the need for a technology platform for assessment development, administration, scoring, and reporting that increases the quality and cost-effectiveness of the assessments. Describe your recommendations for the functionality such a platform could and should offer.
- 3) How would you create this technology platform for summative assessments such that it could be easily adapted to support practitioners and professionals in the development, administration, and/or scoring of high-quality interim assessments?
- 4) For the technology “platform” vision you have proposed, provide estimates of the associated development and ongoing maintenance costs, including your calculations and assumptions behind them.

Project Management Questions

- 1) Provide estimates of the development, maintenance, and administration costs of the assessment system you propose, and your calculations and assumptions behind them.
- 2) Describe the range of development and implementation timelines for your proposed assessment system, from the most aggressive to more conservative, and describe the actions that would be required to achieve each option.
- 3) How would you recommend organizing a consortium to achieve success in developing and implementing the proposed assessment system? What role(s) do you recommend for third parties (e.g., conveners, project managers, assessment developers/partners, intermediaries)? What would you recommend that a consortium demonstrate to show that it has the capacity to implement the proposed plan?